

Waring, the Busy Man, and Vickers,
His Secretary, Study the Subject
Of Dictated Family Correspondence

Strictly Vicarious

BY

HENRY KITCHELL WEBSTER

WARING frowned absently at his watch, took a turn across his office and finally met the eye of his secretary, who sat with expectant pencil, waiting to seize the next words his boss should utter.

"I've forgotten something," said Waring. "Can't think what it is."

Vickers waited.

"Don't you know?" Waring asked.

"No, sir," said the secretary. "Your day sheet is clear."

"Got it," said Waring after another ten seconds of abstraction. "Letter to my wife." He looked at his watch, caught up his hat and moved toward the door.

"You write it," he said. "Going to Pittsburgh. Back Sunday morning."

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Vickers.

Waring had been chosen by a committee of chastened creditors as the one man, perhaps, in the United States who could take the financially complicated affairs of the Ralston Company in hand and bring it back to a condition of solvency.

The Ralston plant occupied the area of a good-sized farm in the small city of Great Bend, where Waring lived in an imitation one hotel and in the somewhat dilapidated house that soon he could begin going home on Sunday.

As a matter of fact, on Sundays he and Mr. Vickers generally spent about twelve uninterrupted hours at the office, cleaning up what couldn't be done on week days.

This particular Sunday, when he came back from Pittsburgh, was no exception. From 9 o'clock to half-past Vickers took down a confidential report and a series of recommendations to the executive committee.

As he informed them, in conclusion, that he was theirs very truly, Waring picked up a rather feminine looking note, ripped it open and began to try to read it.

"From my wife," he explained to Vickers. And, after finally getting a clue at the top of the third page, he added: "Wish she'd take to picture writing. I might read that."

But presently he whistled. "What in blazes did you say to her?" he asked Vickers. "Here! Where are you going?"

Vickers stopped on his way to the door. "To get the carbon from your file," he said.

"Hmp!" said Blake. "Kept a carbon, did you? All right, let's see it."

He read the innocent looking carbon sheet which Vickers placed before him with a sort of Olympian gloom.

"You fell down on me," he said sadly. "That's no sort of letter to write a man's wife."

"Sorry," Vickers said.

"Oh, it's all right," said Waring gloomily. "But I've got to square myself. Get me a sheet of paper that folds over."

He picked up a pen and looked at it dubiously.

The Sabbath calm was broken by the sound of people coming in to the outer office.

"I guess that the committee on costs accounting," Vickers said in answer to Waring's look of inquiry. "You told them to come at 2."

Waring laid down the pen again and turned a pleading look upon the secretary.

Part of Vickers' job was to understand without being spoken to.

"Want me to try it again?" he asked. "I can do better than that. Didn't quite get the idea."

Waring was already on his way to the door of the directors' room.

"Put your back into it," he said before he vanished.

THE young man who remained in the office after the door was shut was no longer the hundred per cent efficient secretary—no longer A. B. Waring per se. V. was a distinctly engaging young chap by the name of Stanley Vickers.

He hesitated a little over picking up the note that Waring had left on the desk, but the spirit of his instructions clearly involved his reading it, so he did so. He meant to do a good job this time, and it was not without its difficulties.

To begin with Stanley Vickers was new. He had never met Mrs. Waring, neither seen a photograph of her. And the illegible scrawl her letter was signed with failed to make it apparent whether her first name was Annie, or Anne, or Alice.

In her answer she had commented satirically on the "My Dear Wife" with which he had begun his other letter, so he clicked out firmly "My Dear," and then he stopped and thought for a while longer.

This wasn't secretarial work. This was literature. The way to get the right atmosphere would be to have some sort of picture in his mind of the lady he was writing to. An attractive lady? Undoubtedly Waring had found her attractive once, and it was a cinch she wanted him. He thought her so still. Brown hair, rather wavy, blue eyes, cheeks without too much color in them, but bright red lips. Oh, bosh! What was he thinking of? Waring was easily fifty-five and his wife was twenty. Waring was sometimes a lot younger than they were? His vision must be the sort of vision that Mrs. Waring would like to think she presented to her husband. Clinch! Now to begin. Nothing fancy. Honest, plain-spoken—affectionate.

"My Dear:

"I own up. As you suppose, I didn't even dictate that last letter to you. I had young Vickers, my secretary, write it for me, and you are perfectly right to feel hurt about it. I am dictating this letter to him now. And I am afraid you will think this makes my offense all the worse. Well, that is what I want to talk about, and I want you to listen patiently until I get through.

"Why do you suppose I forgot—"

Vickers exed the "forgot." He'd be to make a copy, anyway. This was just a draft.

"... put off writing, last week, so long that at last there was no time to do it myself. I was waiting to get business out of the way, and turn young Vickers out of the room, and sit down for a visit with you all by myself. And the time never came. That's all. It never does. And if it did I shouldn't know what to do with it. I've forgotten how to write with a pen, except my signature. Now look here ..."

Vickers, with the third finger of his left hand on the "d," hesitated between

darling and dearest. Then he got an inspiration and grinned.

"... look here, old lady! Why can't you be a good fellow and just let me have a chin with you like this whenever I get the chance? If you'd do that and then get a typewriter yourself and learn to work it, so that I could read the letters you wrote me, why, that would be almost equal to coming home over Sunday. I know what it is that bothers you. You don't like the idea of my young cub of a secretary sitting here and taking down all I say to you and writing it out on the typewriter. Well, now, I'll tell you! He doesn't hear a word. It just goes into his ears and out of his pencil, and that's all there is to it."

Vickers wrote a whole page of vivacious details about Waring's Pittsburgh trip, and then swung into the stretch.

"You've no idea how excited I am, waiting to see what you'll say to all this," he wrote. "I've got a good long letter and tell me you aren't cross any more and that you have fully forgiven your affectionate, but busy husband, who wishes he weren't so busy, so that he could have more time to show how affectionate he really is."

WHEN Waring came back from the directors' room, the letter, immaculately copied, lay on the desk, side by side with the report to the executive committee, both awaiting his signature.

He signed A. B. Waring at the bottom of the report and was about to repeat the signature beneath Vickers' masterpiece, when the secretary stopped him.

"Let me read that first, hadn't you?" he suggested. "See if it's all right."

"I'll look it over afterward," said the boss, and he twisted his mouth over to one side of his face—the regular preliminary to his regular signature.

"You don't want to sign it," A. B. Waring, do you?" Vickers protested. "Always A. B. Waring, sounds kind of funny, I should think."

The boss agreed and signed it Bert. Instead, then he thrust back his chair and got up.

"Look here," said Vickers. "You'll have to read that letter, you know. I may have put something in it that'll give the whole thing dead away. And then you'll have to go home."

"That's so," said the boss. But the telephone rang just then and the person on the wire proved to be one of the Chicago directors who had stopped off the train at Great Bend and thought that he and Waring might spend the evening together, talking things over.

So Waring said he would come right along in the company automobile, pick him up at the station, and take him out to the golf club. Then he hung up the receiver and went for the door.

"You haven't read that yet," he said implacably.

"It's all right. Send it off. I did look it over when signing it. Sure it's all right."

Beginning about Wednesday morning, Stanley Vickers began to be conscious, as he ran through the mail, that he was looking for a feminine envelope addressed in an illegible hand. His feeling about it was close to that of a literary aspirant who is waiting to hear from an editor.

It was more than a week later that he slit open a rather messy looking, typewritten, stamped envelope, and with an expression of distaste began to read the single sheet of paper it contained.

He hated sloppy type-writing and this communication went the limit. It wasn't marginally not dated. It was unequally spaced, and it began "Dear Old Man."

Obviously a touch from some seedy down-and-out, who had known the boss in boyhood days. But he was a conscientious secretary, and he would read it through.

"Dear Old Man

"It's very exciting—I've found I don't know how to spell at all when I have to write real letters that show—but I've been practicing all the week and I can find the right keys without hunting for them hardly at all—I wish you had told me what sort of typewriter—I know—that's spelled wrong—to buy, but I'm sure this one is all right—It's perfectly huge and can add and subtract and everything—and you can hear it all over the house. You know why I didn't answer sooner—didn't you—that I couldn't buy a typewriter and learn to make it write in a minute—and didn't think it was because I was cross and unforgiving—He could be I'm about such a lovely fellow—He'd better—You've never sent me such a letter since—oh well—never mind about that—but if that's the

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way you dictate why dictate all the time—I don't mind having Mr. Vickers write them—so long as he doesn't have to read the ones I write you ..."

The badly written sheet dropped from the conscientious secretary's hands as if it had burnt them. He had just read it automatically. And, quite as automatically, his eye picked up the signature, which was typewritten like the rest, only in caps. She had a rather nice name—Audrey.

He saved the letter out of the rest of Waring's correspondence and when the boss came in, he handed it to him separately.

"I opened this by mistake," he said apologetically. "I think perhaps—that is, it's from your wife."

"From my wife?" said Waring, staring at it. "What in blazes is this?" And then, "What sort of joke is this?"

Vickers told him it wasn't a joke. "If you'll only read it," he protested. But Waring only went on turning it around in his hands, so Vickers explained a little further.

"It's the answer to the letter you had me write. I said in it—that is, you said, that you couldn't write letters by hand and that you were dictating that one to me, and that you only wished she'd get a typewriter and write her letters to you on it, so that you could read them. Just stuck it in for atmosphere, you know."

Waring had begun reading the letter. "Atmosphere," he observed. "That'll cost me a hundred and forty dollars. Add and subtract!"

This was an aspect of the matter that hadn't occurred to Vickers, and he couldn't feel feeling rather pleased about it. It seemed like poetic justice, somehow. But the boss grinned as he handed the sheet back to Vickers.

"She seems to like your line of goods, sonny," he observed.

"You don't want to sign it," A. B. Waring, do you?" Vickers protested. "Always A. B. Waring, sounds kind of funny, I should think."

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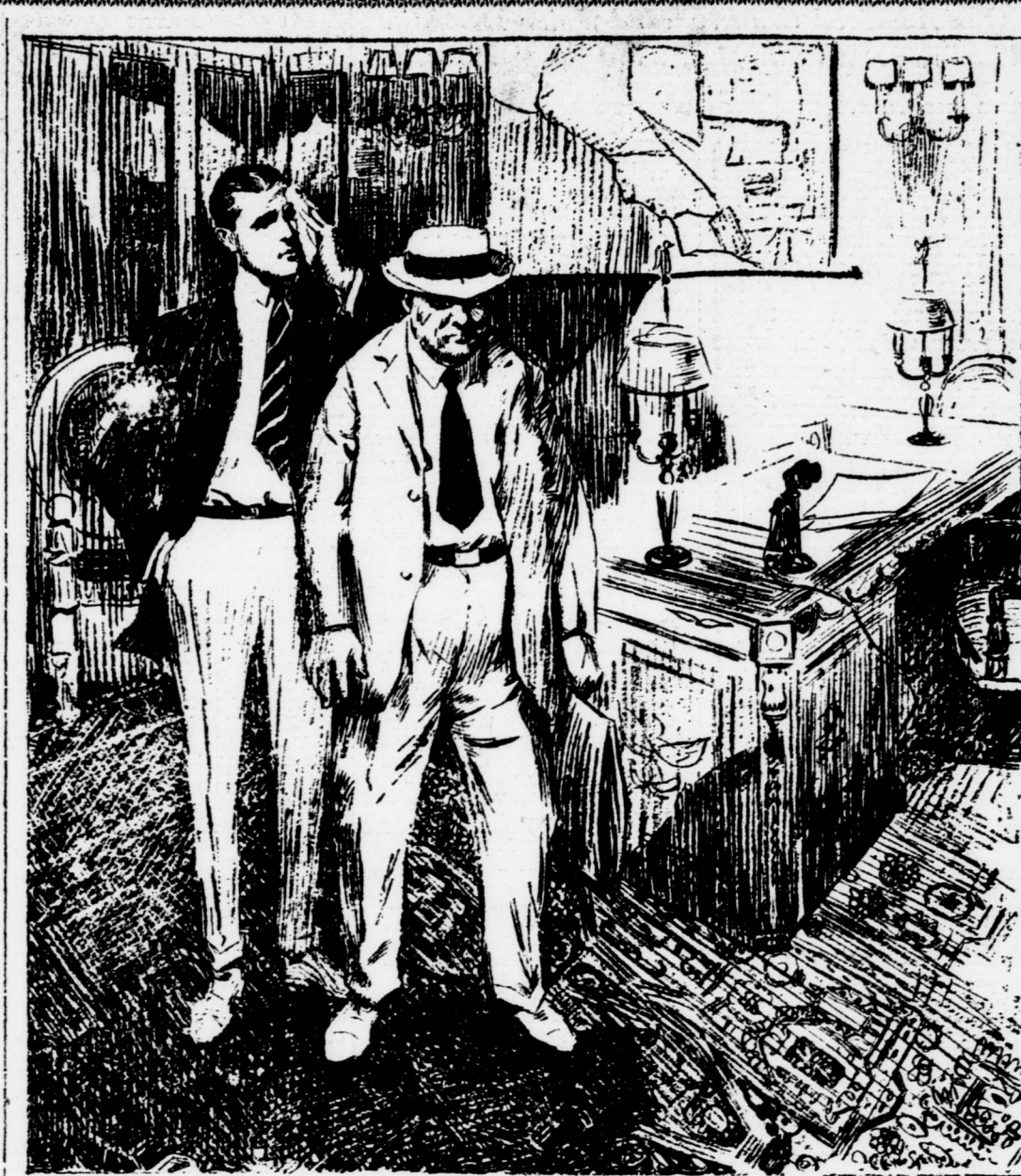
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VICKERS MOPPED HIS BROW. "LOOK HERE!" HE SAID, SO VEHEMENTLY THAT HE MADE WARING BLINK.

Coming anyway. All the more. "What does she mean—all the more?" Waring wanted to know.

"I suppose," said Vickers, "she means that the reasons I gave her why she shouldn't come make her all the more anxious to."

"Pretty good," said Waring. "I never could understand her telegrams. Well, I suppose she won't melt. Be sort of nice to have her around. Only—you'll have to look after her for me, son. I shan't have time."

Vickers mopped his brow. "Look here," he said, so vehemently that he made Waring blink. "There's something I want you to do. You've simply got to do it, that's all—before she comes."

"Before she—? Do you mean my wife? What the dickens has she got to do with it? Here! Where are you going?"

Vickers walked to the private file, opened it and came back with an enormous manila envelope. "This he had out to Waring."

"I want you to read this," he said. "It's the letters she's been writing—you for the last two months, and the carbons of the letters you have written to her—that is, that I have."

Automatically Waring took the envelope. "Yes, sure I'll read it if you want me to," said Waring. "Can't do it now, though. I'm going up to the hotel for dinner. Coming back this evening. I'll be through with those auditors by 10 o'clock. Read it then."

SO all Vickers could do was to prop up the big envelope against Waring's inkstand, and hope for the best. But when he came in next morning, Waring's deprecatory guilty air convicted him.

"Worked with those fellows until after one," he said. "Didn't get those letters read. I'll squeeze them in this morning, some time, sure."

But at half past twelve Vickers was sitting alone in the office and the big envelope was still propped against the inkstand, when some one opened the door behind him.

A woman's voice, with a little accent of surprise, said: "Oh!" and as he rose and turned and faced her, went on, "Isn't Mr. Waring here? You're Mr. Vickers, aren't you?"

He managed to say "Yes," and that Mr. Waring was in the next room.

"I'll get him for you," he added. "Oh, no," she said. "I'll go right in. Thank's just as much."

She crossed to the door his glance had indicated before he could get around from behind the desk to open it for her. In less than a quarter of a minute he was alone again.

And she was in there with the man she thought she'd been writing those wonderful letters of hers to—the man she thought had been writing the letters she had been so pathetically pleased with and eager about, to her. Well, she wasn't old at all. Just a girl, and with a brightness about her that wasn't wholly in her eyes, that seemed to shine, somehow, through her face.

When the buzzer went off at his elbow, from the director's room, Vickers

ers got up, took a steady breath or two, opened the door and went in.

"Oh—yes!" Waring said. "Er—this is Vickers, my dear. He'll look after you—keep you amused somehow, till after dinner. And I shan't be working late tonight. Not after ten."

She was coming toward Vickers to shake hands. Somehow he managed to get his feet in motion and meet her halfway.

The brightness was still in her face. There was a sort of adventurous gaiety about it. She hadn't found out yet!

"I'll do my best," he stammered, "but I'm afraid I'll be pretty poor substitute."

"I don't know," she said cheerfully. "I suspect you're a pretty good one."

"Well, run along now," said Waring. "I'm busy."

In a daze, Vickers walked beside her, out of the office, across a brick-paved court—where an idle automobile might have suggested an idea to him, but didn't—down the shabby street—crossed the street to the nearest street car line. Here he stopped automatically.

"We're waiting for a car, aren't we?" she asked. "But when it comes, where are we going on it?"

"I—I don't know," he said, and then blurted out, "Oh, you must think me a perfectly dreadful fool, but—well, I've had something on my mind that—"

She gave him an understanding nod. "Part of the worry of this dreadful business that's driving my—my husband so. It was frightfully unceremonious of him to bundle me up and hand me over to you this way. I hope you didn't mind."

"N-no," said Vickers. "I was rather glad—that is to say, of course not."

"I haven't had any lunch yet," she suggested. "Have you?"

"I'd forgotten there was such a thing," he told her, more nearly at ease than he had been yet. "We generally send out for a couple of sandwiches. Lunch is a good idea."

"And will that car take us to it?" she asked, nodding to one that was coming along. It said "Golf Club" on it.

"Of course," he exclaimed. "We can get lunch out at the club. I've never been out there, though. I've long. But I've heard it's pretty good."

So they went out to the golf club.

They got a little table on the shady side of the veranda, which they had to themselves, and presently, to Vickers' consternation, he found himself having a wonderfully good time.

They finished the last pretense at lunch by 2 o'clock, but there still was plenty to talk about, so she had him light his pipe and they moved over to another corner where there was a little more breeze.

At 4 o'clock, the arrival in force of a bridge-party drove them from the clubhouse and down to the river, where, in the shade of a thicket of willows, they found a rickety little flat-bottomed skiff. Means of propulsion was totally lacking, but it was dry inside and the thwart were just a comfortable conversational distance apart. So they climbed in and went on talking.

Two of three times, earlier in the afternoon he had given himself a terrible fright by saying something to her that he had already written in one of Waring's letters, but she had seemed oddly unaware of these slips, and by now he no longer kept any guard at all—said anything that occurred to him.

And then this happened.

She was saying something about not liking presents on account of an element of barter, when she interrupted herself to say:

"Oh, but of course you know all about that. I wrote it to you ever so long ago."

And Vickers, with a nod, said "Yes. I remember."

And then there were two simultaneous gasps, and two red flags of blushes, that burned brighter and brighter in two frightened faces. And for the whole of a very long minute they looked at each other, and he pondered her "I wrote it to you," and she his, "Yes, I remember."

Finally, "When," he asked, "—when did you know?"

She laughed uneasily. "Why, from the very first, of course. The letter generally sends out for a couple of sandwiches. Lunch is a good idea."

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